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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the applicability of social comparison and social exchange theories to the family unit. One part of that study concentrated on the effect of the belief that one's parents favored or did not facor oneself over the sibling. College students (N=216) from two-child families were asked to indicate their perception of whether or not the parents favored one sibling over the other. Subjects provided information about the relationships in the two-child family, including closeness and the amount of goods, services, and esteem the parents presently give to each sibling. In addition, subjects indicated feelings of debt and obligation toward the parents and completed three personality scales. The results indicated that respondents who believed they were favored were more likely to be first-born. Favored subjects indicated a belief that they were closer to the parents than was the sibling in both absolute and relative terms. Those believing themselves to be favored were more likely to state a greater sense of obligation to the parents and to act in a way that would please the parents. They also indicated a greater likelihood of actively helping the parents in the future. These findings follow social exchange principles that the recipient of excess rewards incurs an obligation of reciprocity than can be expressed in both emotional and tangible forms. (NB)

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PARENTAL FAVORITISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL HELPING

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Summary

To evaluate the applicability of social exchange theory to the family unit, 216 college students from two child families were asked to indicate their perception of whether or not the parents favored one sibling over the other. Those individuals who believed they were favored were more likely to be first-born. Favored subjects indicated a belief that they were closer to the parents than the sibling in both absolute and relative terms. Those believing themselves to be favored were more likely to state a greater sense of obligation to the parents and to act in a way that will please them. They also indicated a greater liklihood of actively helping the parents in the future.

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PARENTAL FAVORITISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL HELPING

The data reported here are from a larger study of the applicability of social comparison (Adams, 1970; Berger, 1972; Ihinger, 1975) and social exchange (Adams, 1965) theories to the family unit. This report will focus on the effect of the belief that one's parents favored or did not favor the self over the sibling. Social exchange theory would predict that feeling favored (increased outputs) would be accompanied by increased inputs to the parents (Adams, 1965; Leventhal, 1976; Zaleznik, 1966). These inputs could take the form of greater closeness to the parents, or by increased feelings of obligation to assist the parents if they became dependent on resources other than their own.

METHODS

Subject Selection

The subjects were selected from a population of university students on the basis of the following demographic characteristics: (a) all subjects were members of two child families; (b) both parents were living; (c) the parents were living together. The rationale for these requirements was to simplify the complex data that would result if the subjects were asked to describe their relationships with various siblings, deceased parents and step-parents. Of the 286 questionnaires distributed, 216 were returned completed, yielding a return rate of 75%.

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Sample Description

Females made up fifty-five percent of the sample. Slightly more than half the sample (55%) were firstborn, and 45% were second born. The majority of respondents were white (84%), and 15% were black. The average age of the subjects was 20 years. The mean age of the respondents' mothers and fathers was 48.2 and 51.3, respectively.

Instrument

The questionnaire inquired into relationships in the two-child family, including closeness, and the amount of goods, services and esteem the parents presently give to each sibling. Subjects were also asked about feelings of debt and obligation toward the parents in the present and that anticipated in the future when the parents will be elderly, and presumably somewhat more dependent. The questionnaire also contained three personality scales: the Rotter (1966) Locus of Control, the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964).

Assessment of Favoritism

The combined responses to six questions were used to divide subjects into groups of favored, no difference, and not favored. In three of these questions, the subject was asked how the mother would rate him/her relative to the sibling on the characteristics of intelligence, responsibility, and being easy to get along with. The other three items asked the subject to estimate how the father would relatively evaluate the siblings on these three

traits. Subjects responded to these six questions on a 19 point Likert scale, where 10 was the mid-point, a response from 1 to 9 indicated the subject was evaluated more positively than the sibling, and a response from 11 to 19 indicated the subject was evaluated less positively than the sibling. Thus, if the total of the mother and fathers' perceived ratings of the subject was equal to or greater than 66, he or she was placed in the "not-favored group". If the total of the six ratings was 54 or less, the subject was in the "favored" group. Those whose summed score fell between 55 and 65 were in the "no difference" group. With a Chronback's alpha of 0.746, this six item composite score of "favoritism" had adequate internal reliability for use in data analyses.

RESULTS

Distribution of Favoritism Variable

Of the 216 respondents, 150 or 69% fell into the favored group, 25 (12%) were in the not-favored group, and 40 (19%) were in the no difference group. One person could not be classified due to missing data. Birthorder was the only demographic predictor of the belief that one was favored or not. First-borns were more likely to indicate that their parents "favored" them over their sibling on the three traits of intelligence, responsibility, and being easy to get along with ($p < 0.05$).

TABLE 1

Table 2 shows the subjects' own belief of, and also his/her estimates of the mothers', fathers' and siblings' relative evaluations of intelligence, responsibility, and being easy to get along with. The data show that the subjects were in agreement with the parents regarding their "superiority" over the sibling, although they indicated that their sibing would not be in agreement on this issue. Rather, subjects indicated that their sibling would evaluate him or herself as equal with the subject on these three characteristics.

TABLE 2

Closeness

In addition to indicating their level of closeness to each parent, subjects were also asked to respond to questions on their level of closeness to both parents relative to that perceived to exist between the sibling and parents. In support of social exchange theory, the favored subjects indicated they were relatively more close to the parents than did the non-favored subjects (Table 3). Neither sex or birthorder were related to the level of relative closeness.

TABLE 3

Also supporting a reciprocity model, the favored subjects felt they had a greater obligation to the parents (Table 4). On questions of the extent to which the subject would help (and was obligated to help) the parents relative to the extent that the sibling would help (and was obligated to help), the favored

subjects said that they both had a greater obligation to help, and that they would be more likely to help the parents in the future. The birth order or sex of the respondent was not a factor in this reciprocity.

The "not-favored" subjects indicated an obligation and responsibility toward the parents that was either equal to that of the favored brother or sister, or more close to the "point of equality" (a ten on the response scale). For example, the not-favored respondents indicated the siblings were equally as likely to provide the parents with help in the future; had an equal future obligation to the parents, and had an equal probability of having one parent move into their home. This is in contrast to a pure "social exchange", which would result in a lesser obligation.

TABLE 4

Personality

Respondents who believed themselves to be the less favored child had a more external locus of control than did those who were favored. There were no group differences on self-esteem or the tendency to respond in a socially desirably manner.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the effect of the perception of parental favoritism on closeness to and expected levels of future involvement with aging parents. The data from a majority of subjects followed social exchange principles that the recipient of excess rewards incurs an obligation of reciprocity that can be expressed

in both emotional and tangible forms.

However, the attitudes of a small minority of people did not follow social exchange principles, but were better understood as reflecting social norms regarding kinship responsibilities. That is, among the 11% of the sample who admitted that their parents comparatively favored their sibling, the belief of equal responsibility and obligation to the parents was suggested by the data. In this group there was the sentiment that, in spite of their relatively less favored status, there was still an obligation, often equally shared by the siblings to aid the increasingly dependent parents.

Those people who believed their parents favored them stated that they were likely to increase their material inputs to them, as well as shoulder the responsiblity for their well-being in the upcoming years. The favored subjects said that they were more likely to give the parents money, spend time with them and have a widowed parent move in. This pattern of data suggests that the anticipation of future responsibility toward the parents is related to perceptions regarding the relative (psychological) outputs from the parents.

The self aggrandizing phenomena found in this study has been noted in psychological theory. Sherif (1966) has stated that "In view of the autistic tendency to see oneself . . . in as favorable a light as possible, we might regard the self-glorifying images of our own groups as psychologically inevitable" (p. 32).

Rogers' (1959) self-actualizing model provides us with one

explanation for the pattern which has emerged for the individual to over-evaluate himself when compared to a rival (the sibling). Rogers states that the need for positive regard (both from the self and from others) is pervasive and persistent in all individuals. Each person internalizes conditions of worth from early interactions with the parents who invariably communicate that some of the child's behaviors and reactions are more desirable than others. Threfore, each person strives to meet his or her peceptions of the expectations of these significant others by attempting to present the self in a favorable light. Thus the experience of striving to gain approval (meeting the conditions of worth) becomes the individual's reality in that self-evaluation is based upon one's ability to adequately satisfy the conditions of worth. Self-esteem and self-enhancement would grow as a consequence of satisfying these conditions. One way for individuals to achieve a relative gain in esteem from the parents is to devalue the sibling. Such derogation was achieved by asserting that the parents would agree that the sibling was less responsible, easy-going and intelligent than the self.

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TABLE 1

Demographic variables of study sample and by favoritism

	ALL SUBJECTS (N = 216)	FAVORED SUBJECTS (N = 150)	NOT FAVORED SUBJECTS (N = 25)	X^2 COMPARING FAVORED WITH NOT FAVORED
RACE				
White	84%	86%	87%	0.0
Black	15%	14%	13%	
BIRTHORDER				
First born	55%	62%	46%	3.8*
Second born	45%	38%	54%	
SEX				
Male	45%	46%	58%	1.8
Female	55%	54%	42%	

*$p < 0.05$

TABLE 2

One Sample T-Tests for the subjects' rating of his/her self relative to the sibling, and the subjects' perception of how the parents and sibling would make these same ratings.

relative INTELLIGENCE of the subject and sibling as judged by:	MEAN	STD. DEV.	T*
MOTHER	8.32	3.20	-7.0**
SUBJECT	7.89	3.18	-9.0**
SIBLING	10.53	3.52	2.12
FATHER	7.91	3.40	-9.0**
relative RESPONSIBILITY of the subject and sibling as judged by:			
MOTHER	6.99	4.25	-7.0**
SUBJECT	6.63	3.85	-12.0**
SIBLING	10.69	3.47	2.8
FATHER	7.33	4.16	-9.0**
relative EASY-GOINGNESS of the subject and sibling as judged by:			
MOTHER	8.51	4.45	-4.7**
SUBJECT	8.04	3.99	-7.0**
SIBLING	11.11	3.74	4.2
FATHER	8.45	4.42	-5.0**

low score = subject is much more so than sibling
high score = subject is much less so than sibling
ten (10) = neutral point of scale; offspring are the same on that attribute

*T-Test for significance of difference from 10
**$p < 0.001$

TABLE 3

Two sample T-Tests of differences between favored and not-favored subjects in their level of closeness to family members.

	FAVORED (N = 144)		NOT-FAVORED (N = 25)		T
	MEAN	STD DEV	MEAN	STD DEV	
relative closeness to mother	7.42	4.64	11.24	4.09	3.86**
relative closeness to father	8.14	4.49	10.40	4.05	2.36*
absolute closeness to mother	4.29	3.92	6.36	4.98	2.32*
absolute closeness to father	6.06	4.89	7.08	4.87	0.96
absolute closeness to sibling	6.89	5.17	6.04	4.56	-0.76

low scores indicate greater closeness

**$p < 0.001$
*$p < 0.05$

TABLE 4

Two sample T-Tests of difference between favored and not-favored subjects on present obligation to parents, and anticipated future help to parents.

	FAVORED (N = 144)		NOT-FAVORED (N = 25)		
	Mean	STD DEV	Mean	STD DEV	T
PRESENT OBLIGATION:					
to please mother	8.53	4.57	10.64	5.18	2.09*
to please father	8.59	4.68	10.36	5.19	1.71
ANTICIPATED RELATIVE FUTURE HELP TO PARENTS:					
future help to parents	6.87	3.62	10.00	2.58	4.14***
future obligation to parents	7.88	3.13	10.01	2.86	3.28***
giving parents money	3.92	3.47	4.40	4.52	0.61
spending time with parents	6.52	3.95	7.48	4.79	1.08
probability of one parent moving in with subject	6.97	5.62	10.40	5.40	2.83**

lower score indicates greater helping/obligation

*$p < 0.05$
**$p < 0.01$
***$p < 0.001$